
NEWS From:

Congressman Mike Honda

FIFTEENTH DISTRICT - CALIFORNIA



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Hearing Held on Boehlert-Honda Nanotechnology Bill, And Need for Research on Societal And Ethical Impacts

Silicon Valley Expert Testifies

WASHINGTON, April 9, 2003 — Today, expert witnesses testifying before the Science Committee heralded the enormous promise of nanotechnology, but urged more research into societal and ethical concerns to ensure nanotechnology “develops responsibly and with strong public support.” Witnesses praised H.R. 766, the Nanotechnology Research and Development Act of 2003, sponsored by Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) and Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA), as an important step toward achieving that goal. The legislation is slated to be marked-up on April 30, with possible consideration on the House floor the following week.

“We have the opportunity to consider the possible social, legal, ethical, and philosophical issues that might arise as the nanotechnology industry matures. Similar opportunities were missed in molecular genetics and the development of the Internet, and now we wrestle with issues such as genetic screening, privacy, and intellectual property. The challenges that can arise are numerous and complex. We need to establish an Advisory Board made up of experts whose sole responsibility is to deal with unintended consequences--before they occur,” said Rep. Honda.

There have been calls for a moratorium on nanotechnology research and development, by some individuals and organizations. Christine Peterson, President of the Foresight Institute based in Palo Alto, California, warned against that approach. “Today, both public and private spending on nanotechnology is broadly international. Expected economic and military advantages are driving a technology race

already underway. If law-abiding nations choose to delay nanotechnology development, they will relinquish the lead to others,” said Peterson. She echoed other witness’ calls for a study of the ethical implications of nanotechnology.

Boehlert said the consequences of nanotechnology should be approached “with evenhandedness and humility. With evenhandedness because technology, like most human endeavors, inevitably leads to both positive and negative consequences. The one thing we can be sure of is that nanotechnology will be neither the unalloyed boon predicted by technophiles nor the unmitigated disaster portrayed by technophobes. The truth will be in between, and it is worth probing.”

Dr. Vicki L. Colvin, Director of the Center for Biological and Environmental Nanotechnology and Associate Professor of Chemistry at Rice University discussed recent concerns about nanotechnology and mentioned Michael Crichton’s novel *Prey*, “a chilling scenario in which swarms of nano-robots-equipped with memory, solar power generators, and powerful software-begin preying on living creatures and reproducing. This may be gripping science fiction; it is not science fact. It does, however, highlight a reaction that could bring the growing nanotechnology industry to its knees: fear. The perception that nanotechnology will cause environmental devastation or human disease could itself turn the dream of a trillion-dollar industry into a nightmare of public backlash.”

Colvin stated, “the Nanotechnology Research and Development Act is central to avoiding this nightmare scenario.” H.R. 766 includes a provision that establishes a research program to identify societal and ethical concerns related to nanotechnology and requires that such research be integrated into nanotechnology R&D programs insofar as possible. The National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Foundation both recently recommended such an approach.